#SomaliMeToo: Somali-American Relationship with Police and Restorative Justice in the Face of Sexual Violence

Research Thesis

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Table of Contents

Abstract:

The relationship between immigrant communities and policing institutions has been examined extensively in the geography literature. This project extends this literature to focus on the Somali-American community which exists at a unique intersection of citizenship, class, race, and religion. This paper posits that the relationship between policing institutions and this community has been extensively damaged by post-9/11 surveillance programs, which systematically harassed and served to "other" Somali-Americans. Furthermore, the paper also seeks to explore how this eroded relationship led to the public, Twitter-based reckoning of serial sexual abusers within the community that took hold during the summer of 2020, otherwise known as #SomaliMeToo, and what this event means in a larger movement towards prison and police abolition. The research is conducted using two core methodologies; the first, an auto-ethnography which centers the author's own experience as a Somali-American, and the second, digital observations of Twitter posts. Observations show that the Twitter-based eruption was connected to the lack of trust between the Somali-American community and the police. However, rather than spurring further restorative justice practices via the Internet, community members instead erupted and immediately turned towards private healing and justice. This paper concludes by envisioning new ways Twitter and the Internet more generally can be used as a tool for restorative justice and considers what form these spaces and future work within the community will take, while also recognizing the problematic and constrained nature of digital spaces.

Introduction:

The relationship that an individual has with the police is shaped entirely by their identities and the communities to which they belong. Much research has been done to understand how a community's collective immigrant identity and their individual citizenship impacts this relationship and further criminalizes them (Provine, 2011), yet this research has historically not focused on the Somali-American community. This paper seeks to understand the relationship between the Somali-American community and policing institutions, particularly why and how this relationship has become eroded. The paper then uses this understanding of the relational landscape to situate the #SomaliMeToo movement, a response to sexual violence within the community that occurred the summer of 2020 on Twitter.

I began this research by conducting a literature review to get a better understanding of what work was being done to understand the Somali-American relationship with the police. Additional sections examine how Somali immigrants have integrated into their host communities, experience sexual violence, understand and practice restorative justice, and exist in and reshape digital space. While work has been done to better understand how immigrant communities more broadly interact with the police and understand sexual violence, virtually no work focuses on the Somali-American community. This gap also exists in understanding how immigrant communities practice restorative justice and how relationships with the police shape communal resettlement and integration behaviors. Finally, while a few key texts interrogate how Somali immigrants use the Internet, this work has been almost entirely focused on how the Internet is used as a tool for identity building and diasporic networking.

The methodology of this project was two-fold. The core methodology was an auto-ethnography, defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and

systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al., 2011). An auto-ethnographic approach was achieved by centering my own experiences as a member of the Somali-American community in the research, and using this experience to fuel the research. The second methodology was a digital observation of Twitter. In this observation, I followed the trends, posts, and users that were crucial to the #SomaliMeToo movement.

Taken together, my digital observation and my own experiences show that the post-9/11 surveillance programs instituted by American policing institutions have fundamentally eroded the relationship between Somali-American communities and the police. In response to this communal distrust and fear, Somali-Americans have taken on a framework of legal cynicism (Kirk & Matsuda, 2010) as a form of communal protection. Prior to this particular moment, this orientation manifested in the community practice of *dhaqancelis,* which entails sending youth at risk of incarceration to Somalia in an attempt to rehabilitate them. The total distrust of police, legal cynicist structure of the community, the murder of George Floyd (including the conversation and protest in the aftermath of his death), and the nature of Twitter as a platform all created an ecosystem for #SomaliMeToo to erupt. This Twitter-based movement, although seemingly focused on only on accountability for gender-based violence, actually represents the beginnings of the Somali-American community searching for alternative forms of justice that fit into an abolitionist framework. However, within the subsequent months since the movement began, evidence of #SomaliMeToo seems to have been wiped off the Internet. Community behaviors suggest that this erasure is also a result of communal protection.

The paper concludes by examining what the future of abolitionist restorative justice looks like for the Somali-American community, particularly how this healing and discussion can be conducted in digital spaces and how the Internet can continue to be used as a tool for justice.

However, while social media provided a vital space for this reckoning, the construction of the Internet as an ideal space for equal discourse is troubled, as it exists as a corporately mediated, gendered, and classed arena. Finally, further research on Somali-American communities is necessitated, as this community continues to fundamentally reshape the spaces and areas where they live.

Literature Review:

Somali Immigrant Integration

The history of Somali migration to the United States, and the subsequent integration of this community, is not a topic that has been overlooked in academia. Current and past discourse has focused on how the population is unique; as refugees, as predominantly Muslim, as Black. One of the largest threads in studies on Somali immigrant integration has been on how Somali adolescents, including both the children of immigrants and those who migrated at a young age, belong to both their host and home communities. In particular, how have these lines been blurred, and which way do these youth find their allegiance being pulled? In general, young Somalis around the world are found to identify strongly with both their Muslim and Somali identities while remaining wary of claiming an American, British, or Australian identity (Sporton & Valentine, 2007). This struggle with identity has carried on through how Somalis understand and view their own race as well as racial conflict within their new communities. The process by which African immigrants, including Somalis, come to terms with their new racial identity has been studied at length (Darboe, 2003, Ellis et al, 2018). Specifically, researchers have found that this grappling with a new kind of racial and ethnic landscape plays an important role in the integration and assimilation process. However, as I will return to later, an important gap exists in

understanding how race impacts the community's relationship with police on a multitude of levels.

Much of the existing literature seeks to understand how Somalis exist in and simultaneously shape the American communities in which they have been resettled. The history of Somali refugee resettlement has created several hotspots within the United States. The growth of these hotspots, the two largest being Minneapolis, Minnesota and Columbus, Ohio, has largely been facilitated by voluntary agencies which act as an intermediary between the government and refugee populations (Mott, 2010). These agencies seek to fill necessary gaps for new immigrants that may have been otherwise filled by a larger, tight knit community. However, researchers have found that where these immigrants are resettled has important impacts on the geographic patterns of these communities, particularly when it comes to their networks once they are fully resettled. Information on what communities have successfully resettled immigrants, whether that be socially, culturally, or in terms of available jobs, travels quickly within the diaspora. Therefore, when immigrants are resettled in a community with resources amenable to community success, the dissemination of this information very strongly impacts internal migration (Mott, 2010, Chambers, 2018). These information networks, and the migratory patterns they produce, have allowed for some original locations of resettlement to grow their Somali population, such as Columbus and Minneapolis, and while also leading to the decline in the Somali population of others, including the Virginia-D.C. area (Chambers, 2018).

As other scholars and public officials have pointed out, measuring immigrant integration has gone beyond examining employment rates or levels of English mastery; how involved immigrants are in the larger community, both formally and informally, has become a highly important tool in determining how deeply, or if, an immigrant population has been integrated.

Stefanie Chambers elaborates on and summarizes the history of this shift in her book, “Somalis in the Twin Cities and Columbus”. In her chapter on political incorporation, Chambers points out that this method of measurement goes beyond voting statistics, and often other indicators like union engagement or party and governmental outreach provide a much clearer picture of integration. Chambers found that although similar initiatives exist in these three sites of resettlement, both Columbus and St. Paul seem to be lagging behind Minneapolis. While the latter has elected Somali government officials and reported high levels of engagement with a local union that supports warehouse workers and janitorial and housekeeping staff among other professions, the Columbus community in particular has struggled with accusations with workplace harassment and a feeling of being used by politicians. Chambers posits that this difference can be partially ascribed to the larger culture of the Twin Cities as both industrial and a resettlement site for early immigrants. Most interestingly, she argues that unionization is a powerful tool to encourage larger political incorporation with the Somali community (Chambers, 2017).

As discussed above, how, where, and why Somalis have integrated with various communities has been the subject of intense study. However, throughout this sea of research, an important gap has pervaded; what role does the population’s relationship with the police play in the resettlement and integration process? As mentioned earlier, Somalis grasping with their new racial identity has been studied in conjunction with other Black and/or Muslim immigrant communities. Yet, this existing research fails to understand how previously eroded relationships with policing institutions, through post 9/11 surveillance programs and police corruption in their native countries, seriously impacts both the resettlement and integration process. By not

reckoning with this, current research paints an incomplete picture of how Somalis have and continue to resettle within their host communities.

Somali-Americans and Police, Post 9/11

To fully grasp the current relationship between policing institutions and the Somali-American community, we must begin by understanding the process of racialization that occurs for non-white immigrants in coming to the United States. For the purposes of this research, racialization can be defined as "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or group" (Omi & Winant, 2014). Immigrant racialization is highly discussed topic within migration studies, particularly in understanding how Black and Muslim immigrants have been racialized. In particular, recent discourse has focused on what implications immigrant racialization has on both border and immigration enforcement (Romero, 2006, Armenta, 2016, Massey, 2014). This literature has focused on how particular immigrant populations have been racialized in a way that marginalizes them, and in a sense, makes their very existence illegal (Provine & Doty, 2011). While most of the current discussion has focused on Hispanic and Latino communities, an important, but small, portion has focused on the experiences of Black and Muslim immigrants, including the populations that exist at the intersection of these two identities. Academics have found that Muslim immigrants deal with the impacts of their religion now being a racial category (Gotanda, 2011), while Black immigrants struggle with how to negotiate their identity in a space that is actively hostile towards them (Arthur, 2000, Asante et al., 2017). B. Heidi Ellis has become one of the foremost researchers in understanding how the racialization of Black and Muslim, specifically Somali, immigrants impacts members of this community's relationships and experiences with the police. In Ellis'

research, she has found that the intersection of religion, race, and immigrant status positions Somalis at a unique disadvantage (Ellis et al., 2010, 2018).

A major aspect of understanding the Somali American community's relationship with the police is tied to analyzing the role of surveillance programs targeted towards Islamist extremism, particularly within the post 9/11 era. These programs sought to counteract radicalization within the United States, and over time, became laser focused on young, isolated Muslim men (Ellis et al., 2016, King & Mohammed, 2011). Muslim immigrant populations, particularly those that are low-income, have historically been the subject of intense surveillance. As mentioned above, due to where they exist at the intersection of class, religion, race, and immigration status, Somali American communities have been made particular targets for these surveillance programs. Interrogating why the radicalization processes these surveillance programs are intended to curb occur has become a subject of intense study. Current work has focused on the "push-pull" dynamic, the concept that young Muslims are vulnerable to radicalization because of factors that are simultaneously pushing them out of the areas they have resettled or were raised, and pulling them towards Islamic extremism (Weine et. al, 2010, Masters & Siers, 2014, Vergani, 2020). Returning again to the intersection of identities, it seems as though young Somalis have a myriad of factors working to "push" them out that, when compounded with the pull of extremist groups, can allow for easier radicalization. Additionally, recent literature, particularly by Saher Selod, has focused on how the racialization of Muslims impacts and shapes these surveillance programs. Selod argues that both the racialization and surveillance of this population are dependent on a process of "de-Americanization", in which their social rights as citizens have been stripped from them (Selod, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018).

The current body of research on the relationship between immigrants and policing institutions has begun to uncover many questions surrounding larger topics of resettlement and integration of Somali Americans. However, the work connecting the state surveillance programs to the Somali American immigrant community relationship with policing institutions is sorely lacking. While the extent to which surveillance programs are helping or harming these communities, and whether or not they actually protect national interests, has been interrogated, this work has largely existed within a bubble. Analyzing this connection is absolutely necessary to get a full understanding of Somali immigrants navigate the complicated tapestry that is American policing. Another important link that requires further investigation is the impact of policing within the Somali state in the relationship between the diaspora and American policing. A similar problem pervades the literature on Somali policing; existing connections that have not been drawn across borders. As is well known, immigrants do not arrive in a country as a blank slate; they are a collection of their lived experiences that color their worlds and perspectives. How does the way Somalis interact with police in Somalia, impact the way this community interacts with American police? The failure to explore this in current research leaves a gaping hole in grasping this larger relationship. Finally, the current body of research has not paid close attention to the work and organizing Somali immigrants have taken to create alternatives for the current system of surveillance and policing of their communities. How can these communities fight radicalization without relying on an external punitive threat? More commonly, how is intra-communal violence handled and prevented?

Somali-Americans and Sexual Violence

In order to place the eruption that took place the summer of 2020, the topic of this work, in larger context, one must first dissect the ways immigrant communities experience and respond

to sexual violence in the United States. In this context, sexual violence is defined as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (World Health Organization, 2002). As is well documented, the impacts felt in response to sexual violence reach far beyond those actually involved in the act, or the perpetrator(s) and the survivors(s) (Golding et al., 1989, Siegel et al., 1990, Koss et al., 1991, Campbell et al., 2005). Thus, in the case of immigrant communities which have deep and vast links between community members, understanding the impact of sexual violence requires dissecting and analyzing inter- and intra-community relationships. However, while the factors that might make members of immigrant communities more or less at risk for sexual violence has been studied (Decker et al., 2007, Bryant-Davis et al., 2009), the residual effects and impacts left on these communities has not yet been analyzed. I will return to the importance of recognizing and producing research to fill this gap later on. Most of the current research has focused on Latino communities, and has found that immigrant survivors of sexual violence may be less likely to disclose (Ahrens et al., 2010) due to various "cultural" factors. Beyond this, the research landscape has produced conclusions that are not widely applicable across immigrant communities and temporally.

When we focus in on how Somali immigrant communities have responded to sexual assault, there is only a handful of researchers and pieces of work dedicated to understanding this. Of this research, one important finding is brought up but is best explained by Whittaker et al. (2005); the "paradox" of wanting and requesting support in the wake of sexual violence yet also requiring concealment from both the larger community and their own ethnic or social groups. Interrogating and, at the same time, recognizing the limitations of this paradox is crucial to

understanding Somali immigrant communities' responses to sexual violence. Additionally, research is being conducted on the sexual health and education of Somali immigrant communities (Kingori et al., 2018) and how the trauma from sexual violence is compounded from and exacerbated by trauma related to war, migration, and resettlement (Scuglik et al., 2007, Nilsson et al., 2008, Bokore, 2013). Beyond this, research at this intersection is highly limited; how the acts of sexual violence shake up these communities has been sorely underexamined.

As mentioned above, the impact of sexual violence on a community is felt far beyond those who were intimately involved in the act. However, while the political, financial, and everyday impacts of sexual violence have been explored, very little of this research is specific to immigrant communities. This can have long-lasting detrimental effects; if we understand sexual violence as an event with widespread effects, then we can see how these effects are amplified in immigrant communities, which often have tight-knit connections and relationships. These effects might also be further amplified in newer and marginalized immigrant communities, like the Somali-American diaspora. Thus, further research must seek to study and analyze these ripples throughout immigrant communities. Not only is this research imperative to better understand intra- and inter-community dynamics in the face of violence, but also to better understand the options immigrant communities utilize and seek out as a result of sexual violence. One of these options is through the formal justice system. As mentioned earlier, current work has focused on the "cultural" differences between immigrant and non-immigrant communities that might make immigrant survivors more or less willing to seek out their legal options. While understanding these differences is an important venture, a research void exists in exploring what the impact of the relationship between policing institutions and immigrant communities, in this case, Somalis, has on willingness to seek a formalized, legal route to justice. Exploring the intersection of these

two forces is absolutely necessary to gain a clearer picture. Furthermore, it is also important to decenter and recognize the limitations of ascribing cultural differences as an answer to research questions on and about immigrant populations. Research must seek to understand how conditions and subsequent responses are created as a result of societal forces, rather than pinning all variations on a cultural other.

Somalis and Restorative Justice

Members of immigrant communities are turning to and creating possibilities for justice outside the formalized justice system in the wake of sexual violence. One of these avenues is through the restorative justice (RJ) approach. Restorative justice, as defined by John Braithwaite, is a process by which "all the stakeholders affected by an injustice have an opportunity to discuss how they have been affected by the injustice and to decide what should be done to repair the harm" (Braithwaite, 2004). This method of justice centers the healing of both the victim and offender, and moves away from a retributive justice that is focused on punishment for offense against the state (Zehr, 1990, Van Ness et al., 2014). At the core of the RJ approach is the idea of broken relationships; how a mode of justice can create opportunities to restore these relationships and, in turn, the networks that make up communities (Johnstone, 2007, Wenzel et al., 2008, Zehr, 2015). In the context of this paper, it is also important to consider how RJ fits into a prison abolition framework. Both methods call for a re-conceptualization of crime and punishment, and seek to understand how our actions are the consequences of processes external to the individual. As Naomi Sayers states in her recent piece, "The Relationship Between Restorative Justice and Prison Abolition", "the only true restorative justice is prison abolition" (Sayers, 2020).

In addition to understanding how RJ functions as a means towards prison abolition, we must also understand if and how immigrant communities, and particularly Somali-American

communities, have utilized this framework in opposition to their host community's formal justice system. While work has been done on how an RJ framework can be used to shape immigration policies and policing practices (Sullivan, 2017), no influential work has been done to better understand how immigrant communities have used a RJ approach for crime and conflict. Additionally, almost all the existing research on RJ within a Somali context is focused on Somalia and how the country is and can recuperate from civil war, political instability, and the presence of terrorist groups (Zuin, 2008, Abdile, 2012, Reddy, 2016, Ubink et al., 2017). While this work is important, it does not give us an accurate picture of how Somali immigrants make use of a RJ approach in a highly different context in which they are marginalized and racialized. Apart from the lack of literature on how RJ can work within an immigrant community, a gap also exists in how we study RJ. Often, this research is conducted from a top-down perspective. What this often means is that RJ is understood from case study analysis, in which researchers have created the conditions for RJ dialogue and discussed the results or RJ is studied in the abstract, leaving it up to the reader to apply this knowledge. However, this is a misstep. Researchers must ask themselves where are the spaces where RJ is being done and how can work be created to capture these spaces. Without this infusion of lived experiences into the research, the work will remain hollow. Specifically within the context of gender-based sexual violence, RJ requires appropriate consideration of undoing the patriarchal power structure that perpetuates this violence. Considering and responding to particular incidents of violence without a larger consideration of power does not lead to restoration or justice.

Somalis and the Internet

To further contextualize the public reckoning of abusers on social media by Somali youth, this section will assess the various ways Somali immigrants interact with and use the

Internet as a tool for identity exploration, space-making, and transnationalism. Although work at this intersection is highly limited, the most common and formative ways this interaction is taking place is effectively summarized in a few key pieces. The first, “Rethinking Migration in the Digital Age: Transglocalization and the Somali Diaspora” by Saskia Kok and Richard Rogers, which analyzes the role of the Internet in re-shaping a transnational diaspora. Kok and Rogers argue that the Somali diaspora exists within the “transglocalized”, or the state of being steeped in local, transnational, and national networks and practices which exist alongside and separately from one another (Kok & Rogers, 2016). The authors argue that transglocalization is sustained by the Internet, and these networks can also be traced using the Internet as a tool. Transglocalization will be returned to in the paper, and this process is exhibited in “Living Transnationally: Somali Diasporic Women in Cairo” by Mulki Al-Sharmani, although not referenced explicitly. In this piece, Al-Sharmani focuses on the lives of transnational Somali women in Cairo. She argues that these women engage in transnational practices as a way of resisting marginalization by host and home communities on the basis of gender, religion, race, and/or immigrant status. Transnational practices are not then purely financial, political, or cultural, but also a practice of resistance and re-negotiating roles and identity (Al-Sharmani, 2006). Finally, “Social Media Usage, Tahriib (Migration), and Settlement among Somali Refugees in France” by Houssein Charmarkeh argues that information and communication technologies, including social media, are crucial in both the migratory, resettlement, and transnational patterns of Somali refugees in France. The author emphasizes that although crucial, these technologies should not be understood as and are emphatically not great equalizers of information and society (Charmarkeh, 2013).

While the three pieces detailed above provide an excellent starting point, the literature on how Somali immigrants navigate and utilize the Internet is highly limited. One of the most glaring gaps within this subsection of research is a lack of focus on Somali youth. How young people use the Internet to create (and re-create) identity and community has been studied extensively (Maczewski, 2002, Valkenburg, 2005, Davis, 2011, DeHaan et al., 2013, Fullam, 2016), and a sizable section of this literature is focused on immigrant youth (Kumar, 2018, Kissau & Hunger, 2008, Ranganathan, 2009, Elias, 2009, O'Mara & Harris, 2014). However, to the best of my knowledge, there is a singular study on Somali youth and how they navigate the Internet, "Facebook Usage Among Somali Youth: A Test of Uses and Gratifications Approach" by Ismail Dhaha and Abdikarim Igale. This study provides a helpful snapshot of how social media is used by Somali youth, in particular, the notion that Somali youth use social media to "self-describe their own country" (Dhaha & Igale, 2013), but does not aim to place this data within a larger picture of identity-building. Due to the Somali diaspora's nature as a younger and highly dispersed community, research specific to Somali youth and their relationship with the Internet is necessary.

Data and Methods:

Auto-ethnography

The core methodology of this project is auto-ethnography. It is important to preface this discussion how this particular auto-ethnography was done with why an auto-ethnography was necessary for this project. First, is that an auto-ethnographic approach can be used as a means to a true reflexivity within research. Reflexivity refers to the process of recognizing both the role of the researcher and researched within a project, and producing work that both honors this difference while also refusing to essentialize it and recognizes its dynamism (Nagar, 2014). This

is highly important, especially within critical geography, a field that is constantly studying how power shapes spaces and envisioning futures where this power is subverted. Auto-ethnography, a method of research which inherently places the researcher within a larger context while also troubling the boundary between the researcher and subject, can be then be argued for as a tool for reflexive research. How this can work in practice is articulated clearly by Rachel Alicia Griffin's piece "I AM An Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance". In this article, Griffin boldly turns the view of the reader inside, forcing them to recognize the messy, violent, and complicated "baggage" that is often made invisible in a published work. She does not do this for the sake of anarchy itself, but to better understand her own experiences, and the experience of other "Others" (Griffin, 2012). However, while auto-ethnography has the ability to be a powerful tool for reflexive research, it is important to understand the ways it can fall short. Sara Delamont captures many of these critiques in her article, "The Only Honest Thing: Autoethnography, Reflexivity and Small Crises in Fieldwork". While Delamont concludes by arguing against the further use of auto-ethnography by researchers, her point that scholarly standards should not be sacrificed for simply an account of the researcher's life and experiences is important.

The second reason why an auto-ethnography is necessary for this project is due to its focus on the lived experiences of immigrant communities. While auto-ethnography has been popular within fields like anthropology, sociology, and social work, the field of migration studies has seen a recent turn to the methodology (Khosravi, 2007, Knijnik, 2015, Student et al., 2017, Chandrashekar, 2017, Fernando et al., 2019). In particular, the field has found that there is a power and richness to literature that centers the experience of migrant authors to understand and pack the processes of migration. Migration studies works as a great mode for auto-ethnography

because migration is messy with unclear definitions and timelines, and which require a lived experience to truly understand. This is unpacked in Shahram Khosravi's article, "The 'Illegal' Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders". In this piece, Khosravi seeks to understand the illegality denominated by national borders, and details his travels throughout Asia and Europe to do so. While it is entirely possible to understand borders and migration through a traditional ethnography, Khosravi's work, particularly the recounting of the personal and intimate ways border crossing is "performed", provides the audience with a deeper understanding of these processes.

For this project, I conducted an auto-ethnography by centering my own experiences within a Somali-American community, as a target of police surveillance, and as a witness to how social media was used in the wake of sexual violence within a community. The paper concentrates on how I experienced this moment as a culmination of various processes and factors, and infuses my own intimate knowledge of these communities and their relationships in understanding this particular moment. Beyond this, I also applied an auto-ethnographic approach within my digital observations. This will be expanded on in the following section.

Digital Observation

The second methodology used was an online observation, primarily on Twitter. Again, the discussion of how the online observation for this project was conducted will be prefaced by a review on the current discourse surrounding this methodology. First, online observation is a research method that calls for researchers to "observe" subjects using the Internet. Online observation is generally considered to be a "non-invasive" and geographically dispersed form of research that allows research to be conducted from virtually anywhere (Fielding et al., 2010, Comely et al., 2010). Online observation has also been crucial in understanding the formation of

social and communal networks and personal identities via the Internet. Examples of this kind of research can be seen in “Performing Health identities on Social Media: An Online Observation of Facebook Profiles” by Nelya Koteyko and Daniel Hunt, and “The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online” by Bernie Hogan. Recent discourse has been centered on establishing the ethics of online observation, and online research methods more broadly. Citing an example of an online community that had been inappropriately made the subject of a university course, Brittany Kelley highlights the importance of incorporating a “goodwill methodology”, or the act of focusing on subjects with a “loving critique” in her piece “Toward a Goodwill Ethics of Online Research Methods” (Kelley, 2016). In “Facebook as a Research Tool for the Social Sciences” by Michael Kosinski, Sandra Matz, Samuel Gosling, Vesselin Popov and David Stillwell, the authors want to work towards an ethics standard for social sciences, including delineating a border between what is “reasonably” public or private (Kosinski et al., 2015).

The type of online observation conducted for this project falls into “buzz research”, a category of online research method defined by Pete Comley and Jon Beaumont in “Online Research: Methods, Benefits and Issues — Part 2”. Buzz research is understood by the authors as analyzing or monitoring what users are “saying and learning from others” within these social media based communities (Comley & Beaumont, 2011). For this project, online observation was focused on how accounts (which self-identified as Somali-Americans who lived in either in the Twin Cities or Columbus) interacted with one another and also disseminated information from June 16, 2020 onwards (the nucleus of the eruption this past summer). In addition to the accounts that were traced, tweets containing hashtag #SomaliMeToo was also cataloged and compiled. The online observation honed in on a few key accounts, users, and trends. In addition to this, the

aforementioned nucleus, or the tweet that set things into motion, was also recorded. The research design for this project was highly informed by the "The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods", which was edited by Nigel Fielding, Raymond M. Lee & Grant Blank. In particular, the author's method of understanding social phenomena through networks that are formed and exercised through social media, served as a guide for online observation (Fielding et al., 2008). This was important in observation that linked accounts to one another, and to place them within a larger context. Finally, the online observation was also rooted in an auto-ethnographic approach. I used my own intimate understanding of the Somali-American social media landscape to inform this research. What this looked like was that the online observation was conducted using my own Twitter account, and I did not set an account up for the purposes of this project. Using my own Twitter account, which was created in 2014 and follows/interacts with predominantly Somali users, for online observation was crucial to maintain the auto-ethnographic methodology. The Twitter experience, even in comparison to other social media platforms, is highly user-specific, with the networks, posts, and accounts one has access to being dependent on that a user has already interacted with. It would have been insufficient and unsuccessful within an auto-ethnography to attempt to create these networks for the purposes of digital observation.

Results:

I will present my findings in three sections. The first will explore the relationship between Somali-American communities and the police, particularly within the post 9/11 era, and examines how this relationship has been eroded. The second focuses on the #SomaliMeToo movement, and attempts to place this moment within a larger context, both linearly and through an analysis of how the communities to which one belongs shapes experiences. The final section

examines what the landscape looks like now, and concludes by envisioning how Twitter might be used as a space for restorative justice in the future.

Surveillance & Relationship Between Somali-American Communities and Policing Institutions

One of my first encounters with police that I can recall was when my older sister had picked me up from elementary school. She had gotten pulled over for a minor traffic violation, and the police officer asked my then 17-year old sister where she and her "daughter" (me, aged 10) were headed. However, what I remember the most from this interaction, was the sheer tension that seemed to grip the space. My sister, who still is incredibly outgoing and personable, began to move in almost a mechanical way to pick up her wallet, kept her eyes straight forward, and answered each of his questions in a slow, careful voice with as few words as possible. This atmosphere followed us home, and I remember finding it difficult to articulate what I had just experienced and shake off the intense fear I had felt. I recognize now that my experience is not unique, but rather a product of community wide distrust, anxiety, and suspicion of policing institutions. Having lived virtually my entire life in the post 9/11 era, experiencing surveillance and harassment at the hands of police was my only reality. Although the relationship between Somali-Americans and the police would have never been one centered around protection and justice due to our racial and immigrant identities, the effect of surveillance programs led to a complete lack of trust in and fear of policing bodies. As a result of these surveillance practices, I argue that the Somali-American community now take a legal cynicist approach to American policing, defined by Kirk and Matsuda as an orientation that views policing institutions as "illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill-equipped to ensure public safety" (Kirk & Matsuda, 2010).

How can we understand the relationship between the Somali-American communities and the police prior to the attacks on September 11th? The literature on the relatively short time period between when Somalis began to permanently migrate to the United States in large waves, 1991, and the attacks is sorely lacking. Although our religious identity had not yet been fully criminalized, the intersection of race, class, citizenship, and religion at which Somali-Americans exist caused an othering that is still present today (although it now takes on a heightened fashion). Conversations with community elders and hearing their stories of their initial resettlement reaffirms that the relationship between police and the community was never a safe one. Thus, the older generation was already beginning to shelter the younger generation, and raise their children with an understanding that American policing impacted and shaped their lives in violent ways. A similar protective practice can be seen within African-American communities (Brunson, 2007, Dottolo & Stewart, 2008, Coates, 2015) in teaching children the contours of this relationship from a young age. Furthermore, the criminalization of the community's identities contributes to "unsuccessful" resettlement practices, unsuccessful in the sense that the Somali-American community would further isolate themselves as a protective behavior.

After 9/11, the Somali-American relationship with the police drastically changed in multiple ways. First, Somali-American communities, especially in areas where they constituted the largest and most visible Muslim population, became the subject of not only local policing bodies, but also statewide and federal organizations which now viewed our community as the embodiment of this terroristic threat. This is exhibited in a number of ways. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) suddenly became a much larger and more looming presence in the everyday lives of the community. Even as a US citizen, by the time I had entered high school, I had already had two separate interactions with FBI officers and was well aware of

my rights in speaking to them. My interactions, and the ones experienced by the community as a whole, were centered on protecting national security and American citizens, but with an underlying tone that emphasized that we were the ones the nation needed to be protected from. This feeling of being the enemy was amplified by Executive Order 13780, or the Muslim Ban, which was signed into effect by President Trump. This kind of surveillance was not only a literal tracking and enforcing of borders that Somali bodies were not permitted to cross, but also fostered the larger feeling of being made the enemy of the state. This moment forced the community to tense up and reckon with the fact that we were still being watched, including at the level of the federal government.

Second, surveillance was used not only by these policing institutions as a formal mechanism, but also civilians played a crucial role in watching the community, what Neve Gordon and Moriel Ram call, following Foucault, the "biopolitical techniques of population control" (Gordon and Ram, 2016). We can see how the Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE, program fit into this model of using citizens as a tool for surveillance. The Obama-era initiative is aimed at community-based organizations, police departments, and social service providers, and tasks them with creating programs to stop or identify possible violent extremists (ACLU, 2016). This program has been widely criticized for promoting the idea that radicalization can be predicted though generic risk factors, and as being dangerous to Muslim-American communities who are the most likely to be targeted and surveilled under this program (Brennan Center, 2019). However, while the CVE initiative has been largely abandoned, the core sentiment has not; citizens are encouraged, and it is in fact their civic duty, to report behaviors or persons that they feel are suspicious. What this looks like is the police being called to a local mosque when crowds begin to form during late night prayers or reporting a neighbor to the FBI and being positive that

the mother of five is a member of Al-Shabaab (incidents that have occurred within the Columbus, Ohio community). Citizen led surveillance is especially felt within the Somali community because of our intense visibility, in terms of size but also an unwillingness/inability to change the markers that make us so obvious, such as speaking in our native tongue and wearing the *hijab*. For Somali-Americans, there is no escaping the constant surveillance, as it exists in every form of policing body and is ingrained in every dutiful citizen.

We can also see how this fundamental distrust of policing institutions extends into how Somali-Americans navigate the carceral system. The result of this surveillance has not merely been the harassment of community members, but also a number of prosecutions and convictions. While some of these have been on terrorism-related federal charges, even more so have been on common, domestic charges. As a microscope has been fixed on this community, Somali-Americans are at great risk of having their daily behaviors be criminalized. Once in the prison system, our community has become disillusioned to the idea that the American justice system is rehabilitative. Somali-Americans who have been convicted and served their time exit to find a world that has become even more hostile towards them, as they experience further surveillance and diminished freedoms. For members of the community who are not citizens, American justice means deportation to a country they do not remember or do not know. In an effort to prevent community members from continuing down a path that may put them more at risk of incarceration, Somali-American often turn towards the communal practice of *dhaqancelis,* or the process of sending "at-risk" youth back to Somalia to correct their behaviors and reduce their risk of getting caught in the carceral system. This practice will be returned to later on as an indicator of the community's propensity towards restorative justice.

The feeling of being watched by, and relatively powerless to, several different policing bodies is stifling. It is a burden that continues to grow after each interaction, each conviction, each story of another family member or friend who has been harassed or abused. This burden makes it wholly impossible for me and my community members to see the police as a means towards justice, when so much injustice was being done unto us by them. Community members have been forced to view one another as the only safe space. In this isolation and fear, legal cynicism has taken hold. Somali-Americans have taught themselves that it is an imperative to always protect the community *from* the police.

#SomaliMeToo Movement and Twitter Eruption

> *"TW: S*XUAL ASS*ULT [sic]*
> *I WAS SEXUALLY ASSAULTED 4 YEARS AGO BY [tagged account] WHILE COMPLETELY UNABLE TO GIVE CONSENT. EXPOSE THESE ABUSERS!! TIME IS UP F***ERS."*
>
> Muna Ahmed's Twitter post, 2020

On June 16th, 2020, Muna Ahmed, a Somali-American young woman from Minnesota, posted the above statement on Twitter. Two days later, her post had been shared over 4,000 times (Sahan Journal, 2020). This post sent shockwaves throughout the Somali-American community. The directness and anger with which she made her statement sparked a moment for the Somali-American community, appropriately dubbed #SomaliMeToo. Twitter users within the community, most of whom were women, took this chance to air out their own experiences with sexual violence and call out patterns of abuse. Ahmed's call to "expose these abusers" was taken literally by many who posted the name, photo, and account of their own abuser. In fact, during this time, I was sent a spreadsheet that was circulating via Twitter in which victims had named their abusers and cited in detail what had been done to them. The perpetrators were diverse,

ranging from the college student who had drove a victim to a deserted parking lot and essentially trapped her in his car until she "agreed" to have sex with him to the religious leader who had a pattern of inappropriate and harassing behaviors towards young women both had their actions brought to light. During this time, Twitter became a public space for both accusations and rebuttals. The men being accused took to the forum to deny these allegations, to defend themselves, and crucially, to make their victims seem uncredible. For example, abusers would post screenshots of text messages or record phone calls with their victims and argue that sustained conversation or relationships proved that their victims were lying. Ahmed's abuser himself posted a statement on his page accusing her of defamation and threatened to sue her. However, as #SomaliMeToo was being used as platform for debate and discrediting, the movement also carved out spaces for abusers to take accountability and correct their behaviors, including cases where the survivor and abuser worked together through open conversations to mend their relationships and heal trauma. It is important to note that this moment was not the first time that the Somali-American community was talking about sexual violence, but rather these were arguably the first conversations that were not just whispers shrouded in secrecy; #SomaliMeToo was a guttural scream that had finally been unmuzzled.

This eruption must be situated in time to get a true understanding of why and how it became so widespread. First, #SomaliMeToo occurred nearly three years after the original #MeToo movement grabbed international attention. As users of social media and witnesses to this movement, young Somali-Americans were aware of the power that existed in public testimony, and also saw how the Internet could be used as a tool for justice. However, just as Sarah Jaffe argues in "The Collective Power of #MeToo", both of these movements were built off years of hard work by organizers. Within the Somali-American community, these pioneers

were shamed for sharing their stories, and only recently have their powerful stories and their efforts to seek justice within the community begun to be recognized. Like #MeToo, it also important to understand that the stories being shared during both of these movements were narratives of violence against women. In cases of sexual violence, a high level of trust between police and the victim is necessary because of the intimate nature of the crime (Moore and Baker, 2018). In this moment, where there was a dismal level of trust between police and Somali-Americans, survivors are more unlikely to report the crimes against them to the police. Second, #SomaliMeToo had occurred in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department, and was concurrent with the subsequent protest and rebellion as a response to his death. In the wake of Floyd's murder, Black people all over the world were confronting and talking about the ways that systems of abuse impact their lives, and many of these conversations led to discussions on prison and police abolition. Somali-Americans in both the Twin Cities and Columbus were extremely instrumental in both organizing efforts and in pushing these conversations forward (Star Tribune, 2020). Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the communal practice of *dhaqancelis* had primed the community to envision and seek out alternative forms of justice. Somali-Americans had already channeled their distrust and fear of police into a productive, distinct rehabilitative process; *dhaqancelis* paved the way for #SomaliMeToo to take off in the way it did. This moment was compounded by a community belief that these policing institutions served to further victimize us. #SomaliMeToo existed at the crucial nexus of building intra-communal tensions, an international focus on abolition, the legal cynicist, alternative justice-oriented context in which they were raised, and an understanding of how social media can be used as a tool for justice, that young Somali-Americans found themselves at.

However, a question remains; what then was the goal of the #SomaliMeToo movement? Understanding the community's legal cynicist perspective and their participation in the work that was being done after George Floyd's murder, the goal for many of the victims could not have been to pursue their cases through the formal justice system or see their abusers be punished by the state. Instead, Somali-Americans who had come forward with their own stories of abuse did this to protect both themselves *and* the community. The victims were a part of a community that valued and actively worked towards protecting other members from policing institutions. Thus, these victims had to find alternative avenues for justice. The duality of Twitter as a public space that, at the same time, offered some kind of privacy made the social media site the perfect arena for this movement (Schmidt, 2014). Victims could share their testimony with their online networks in a way that reflected the social networks of the offline community. With their tweets, survivors were, at once, protecting themselves, other potential victims of their abusers, and the community from having to suffer another loss. Two notes must be made here. First, it is important to understand that the Somali-American victims and the community are not unique in this approach. In particular, African-American women who have survived sexual violence have historically neglected to pursue charges against their abusers, and this behavior is rooted in a similar kind of imperative to protect their communities and a legal cynicist view of police (Hine, 1989, Bell, 1992, Donovan & Williams, 2002, Carr et al., 2007). Second, the protection that Somali-Americans victims feel toward their community is not an inherently positive one, especially when victims are silenced and further victimized to protect their abuser. The community is envisioning new forms of justice for victims, but we must simultaneously imagine ways that protecting the community is an entirely positive and socially reproductive behavior.

The #SomaliMeToo movement was born from the same vein as *dhaqancelis* in that the community was turning away from the formal justice system, but differed in that this moment was focused on finding new ways to center the healing and voices of survivors in their cries for justice. Somali-American communities were now explicitly looking towards a restorative justice approach, one that fit directly into a larger abolitionist framework. The specifics of the eruption are outlined and discussed in the following section.

The Wake of the Eruption

> *"I remember when Somali women were forward about their sexual assault and I was just sitting there thinking that not only were they brave also I wasn't alone"*
>
> Twitter post from January 2021

In the several months since the initial eruption of #SomaliMeToo, what does the virtual landscape look like today? Having begun my formal research in September of 2020, all of my digital observation occurred in the direct aftermath of the movement. What I witnessed during my formal observation was a jarring contrast to what I had witnessed as a member of the Somali-American community during this moment; the community seemed to completely retreat inwards. In the months after Muna Ahmed's initial tweet, accounts dedicated to spreading the names and information of abusers were closed, and the powerful tweets of survivors have been deleted. In fact, Ahmed's account was first made private and then had been deactivated by November of 2020. Many of these survivors had left almost no virtual trail of this explosive movement. What was left were the occasional post ruminating on the movement, such as the one above. Why did #SomaliMeToo seem to simply cease to exist when other online movements, including #MeToo, sustained their Internet-based ecosystems for longer periods of time? The answer requires returning to the communal protection felt by members of the Somali-American community.

#SomaliMeToo, by virtue of the movement being one that was centered on social media which forced these overdue conversations to take place in a public space, made the community feel entirely too exposed to the systems that we were supposed to protect ourselves from. Beyond this, the erasure of posts is also inextricably connected to the way in which violence against women is shrouded in shame and secrecy. While #SomaliMeToo was an act of resistance against the silencing of survivors, the larger patriarchal and sexist systems of power compounded with the pressures placed on participants of #SomaliMeToo by the larger Somali-American community to protect their community always led to create an environment where survivors felt they must retreat inwards. It is also important to note that at the same time as #SomaliMeToo had taken hold online amongst younger women, older women within the community were simultaneously inspired to share their stories but sought more private, offline spaces to do so, including group phone banks that are popular amongst older Somali women. This difference is important, as it shows the widespread nature of #SomaliMeToo and also showcases a source of the pressure that younger survivors felt to keep their trauma hidden.

Within the community offline, simultaneous conversations were being had; the first asking how the culture could be changed to protect women, and the second focused on what these accusations and pursuits of justice meant for the community as a whole. These offline conversations were set off by the virtual movement, and were often initiated by the community members who were not themselves survivors or perpetrators, but had been felt a responsibility to heal trauma and reshape how the Somali-American community responds to sexual violence. The discussions included the victims as well; while their declarations and the entire #SomaliMeToo movement was rooted in an avoidance of the formal justice system, many wondered how their

statements may unintentionally lead to further criminalization and surveillance of their community.

With the slow erasure of the #SomaliMeToo movement online, we must also ask what this means for the restorative justice-based approaches and abolitionist practices that were set off by this movement and how they can be sustained and implemented in the face of gendered oppression. What we see now is that the end of #SomaliMeToo meant a ceasing of the Internet being used as a tool for alternative justice within the Somali-American community. Posts from either victims or abusers seeking ways to heal the wounds left after sexual violence just did not exist on Twitter anymore, as the community members either deleted their initial posts or neglected to further these conversations online. It is important to understand that this does not mean the community was no longer seeking alternative routes to justice and continuing to envision and forge abolitionist futures offline, but rather the complete opposite. Community members in the Twin Cities and Columbus were, and are, sustaining these conversations and seeking healing through methods like community events, like the event seen in Figure 1 below, and one-on-one mediation between victims and abusers. Earlier this year, I attended a healing centered conversation for victims of sexual violence within the community, and observers had the chance to confront how we participated in and condoned systems of abuse within our community. Opportunities and spaces for restorative justice to take place on the Internet in the future will be discussed in the following section. However, one thing remains clear; in the

months since #SomaliMeToo, powerful restorative justice practices have taken hold off the community, and do not seem to be going away any time soon.

Figure 1: Twitter post, June 2020

Discussion and Conclusion:

By virtue of our multiple, marginalized identities, Somali-American communities have been the targets of routine harassment and surveillance at the hands of police and policing institutions. This hostile relationship has led to a lack of trust in police and to a legal cynicist approach when dealing with policing and carceral institutions. Prior to the #SomaliMeToo movement, the community had turned to practices such as *dhaqancelis* as a way to shield ourselves from the police. The #SomaliMeToo movement took place in a highly specific moment in time, and was shaped by larger conversations surrounding sexual violence that occurred during #MeToo, and conversations on prison and police abolition following George Floyd's murder. #SomaliMeToo is impossible to disentangle from external and internal systems of patriarchal and sexist power within communities, but also was the result of a communal

orientation to protect ourselves from the police always. Survivors, and subsequently the accused, took to Twitter for the platform's simultaneity as a public and private space to share their stories and begin to heal from trauma without turning to the formal justice system in which they had no faith. However, in the following months, evidence of #SomaliMeToo had been scrubbed off the Internet. The answer to this lies in understanding why the movement took place to begin with; community members deleted their posts and accounts as another form of communal protection in the face of retributive power structures. While #SomaliMeToo had been deleted online, fruitful discussions and bonding practices, particularly between survivors and abusers, were being done by community members offline. One of the major root causes of this violence, systems of gendered oppression, has not been resolved, but the systems of abuse and cultural practices that enabled sexual violence (including the idea that one must protect the community at their own detriment) were addressed and continue to be at the center of an ongoing campaign for lasting justice.

While this paper provides an important starting point, a number of the conclusions reached must be emphasized. First, restorative justice encompasses much more than simply providing spaces for community members to resolve conflicts without a punitive threat. Calling back to an earlier quote by Sayer in that the only true restorative justice is prison abolition, this requires that large power structures are unraveled, otherwise, restorative justice work, including #SomaliMeToo, is only piecemeal. Additionally, social media, and the Internet as a whole, must be problematized as an unequal, corporately mediated space. Following the work of Mark Graham, the way we envision and represent digital space has real consequences in how it is shaped (Graham, 2013). Thus, when constructing the Internet as an arena where difference and

power structures do not exist, we are painting an inaccurate portrait and allowing these imbalances to continue.

I would also like to review the methodology for this project, specifically the digital observation portion. While this aspect of the research was necessary as #SomaliMeToo initially erupted on Twitter, my digital observation was temporally limited in that data collection was done after the movement had moved primarily offline and much of the earlier data had been deleted. Using an auto-ethnographic approach helped to fill in many of the gaps that would have been left using digital observation alone, but there were unfortunately many limitations that could not have been overcome.

Moving forward, more research on Somali immigrant communities is necessary. As a Somali-American, I am a firsthand witness to the power, creativity, and oppression of these communities. Yet, work that focuses on my community is sorely lacking. In particular, research focused on younger generations, especially as they grapple with their identities both on- and offline and its impacts on how they navigate the world, is highly important. It is also important to continue research on #SomaliMeToo. This movement was the outcome of a distinct intersection of identities, time, and space, but has the ability to reveal deeper truths about both Somali-American communities and immigrant communities as a whole.

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